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# TIME

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## A conversation between author Cormac McCarthy and the Coen Brothers, about the new movie *No Country for Old Men*

A conversation between Cormac McCarthy and Joel and Ethan Coen

If you were going to play the parlor game of arranging the most interesting, improbable, imaginary conversation among American entertainers, you could do worse than the one that took place in midtown Manhattan earlier this month. The participants were the filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen, known for smart, stylish and slightly silly movies like *Fargo* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, and the novelist Cormac McCarthy, who won the National Book Award for *All the Pretty Horses* and the Pulitzer Prize for *The Road*. If it were a reality show it would be called *Eccentric Genius Island*.

McCarthy and the Coen brothers have just collaborated on a movie version of McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men*, a thriller about a serial killer and a busted drug deal. It's a searing, shocking movie that plays like a eulogy for the great American West. It also features the best scene ever filmed of a dog chasing a guy in a river.

McCarthy is famous for two things: his omnivorous curiosity and his extreme reclusiveness. In his 74 years, he's given a total of three interviews. But here he chats freely with the Coen brothers, who have a tendency to finish each other's sentences. Time's LEV GROSSMAN was invited to observe. The conversation took place in a fancy hotel room with stunning views of Central Park in early autumn. Nobody glanced out the window even once.

**CORMAC MCCARTHY** What would you guys like to do that's just too outrageous, and you don't think you'll ever get to do it?

**JOEL COEN** Well, I don't know about outrageous, but there was a movie we tried to make that was another adaptation. It was a novel that James Dickey wrote called *To the White Sea*, and it was about a tail gunner in a B-29 shot down over Tokyo.

**C.M.** That was the last thing he wrote.

**J.C.** Last thing he wrote. So this guy's in Tokyo during the firebombing, but the story isn't really about that. He walks from Honshu to Hokkaido, because he grew up in Alaska and he's trying to get to a cold climate, where

he figures he can survive, and he speaks no Japanese, so after the first five or 10 minutes of the movie, there's no dialogue at all.

C.M. Yeah. That'd be tough.

J.C. It was interesting. We tried to make that, but no one was interested in financing this expensive movie about the firebombing of Tokyo in which there's no dialogue.

ETHAN COEN And it's a survival story, and the guy dies at the end.

C.M. Everybody dies. It's like Hamlet.

E.C. Brad Pitt wanted to do it, and he has this sort of remorse or regret about it. But he's too old now.

J.C. But you know, there's something about it--there were echoes of it in No Country for Old Men that were quite interesting for us, because it was the idea of the physical work that somebody does that helps reveal who they are and is part of the fiber of the story. Because you only saw this person in this movie making things and doing things in order to survive and to make this journey, and the fact that you were thrown back on that, as opposed to any dialogue, was interesting to us.

C.M. David Mamet has a collection of essays called Writing in Cafés, or something like that. He says that the ideal venue for a playwright is to write radio plays, because then you have nothing, just--this is what somebody said. That's it. You have nothing to fall back on. That's quite interesting. Plays are hard, and I suspect that a lot of people who write plays don't really know how it's going to play. I mean, how do you know? Like some years ago, my wife and I went to see Ralph Fiennes do Hamlet. And I'd seen movies of Hamlet, I'd seen kind of amateurish productions, and I'd read the play. But we walked out of that theater, and we stood there, and we went, "Holy s---." Now how did Will know that was going to happen? [Everybody laughs.] So my question is, At what point do you have some sense of whether a film is going to work or not, as you're working on it?

J.C. I can almost set my watch by how I'm going to feel at different stages of the process. It's always identical, whether the movie ends up working or not. I think when you watch the dailies, the film that you shoot every day, you're very excited by it and very optimistic about how it's going to work. And when you see it the first time you put the film together, the roughest cut, is when you want to go home and open up your veins and get in a warm tub and just go away. And then it gradually, maybe, works its way back, somewhere toward that spot you were at before.

C.M. See, I don't see how you could feel that. I would think that when you see the damn frames go by for the 45th time, it just doesn't mean anything anymore. Obviously that can't be true, but ...

E.C. Well, you're problem-solving at that point. You're working on it. It's only painful when the movie's done.

C.M. So tell me about this horrible dog. Was Josh [Brolin, who plays Moss] just terrified of this animal? You pushed a button, and it leapt for your jugular?

J.C. It was a scary dog. It wasn't a movie dog.

C.M. It was basically trained to kill people.

J.C. It was basically trained to kill people.

E.C. The trainer had this little neon-orange toy that he would show to the dog, and the dog would start slavering and get unbelievably agitated and would do anything to get the toy. So the dog would be restrained, and Josh, before each take, would show the dog that he had the toy, he'd put it in his pants and jump into the river ...

J.C. ... without having any idea of how fast this dog could swim. So the dog was then coming after him ...

E.C. ... so Josh came out of the river sopping wet and pulled the thing out of his crotch and said--he was talking to himself--he said, "What do you do?" "Oh, I'm an actor." [Everybody laughs.]

C.M. There are a lot of good American movies, you know. I'm not that big a fan of exotic foreign films. I think Five Easy Pieces is just a really good movie.

J.C. It's fantastic.

C.M. Days of Heaven is an awfully good movie.

J.C. Yeah. Well, he is great, Terry Malick. Really interesting.

C.M. It's so strange; I never knew what happened to him. I saw Richard Gere in New Orleans one time, and I said, "What ever happened to Terry Malick?" And he said, "Everybody asks me that." He said, "I have no idea." But later on I met Terry. And he just--he just decided that he didn't want to live that life. Or so he told me. He just didn't want to live the life. It wasn't that he didn't like the films. It's just, if you could do it without living in Hollywood ...

J.C. One of the great American moviemakers.

C.M. But Miller's Crossing is in that category. I don't want to embarrass you, but that's just a very, very fine movie.

J.C. Eh, it's just a damn rip-off.

C.M. No, I didn't say it wasn't a rip-off. I understand it's a rip-off. I'm just saying it's good. [Everybody laughs.]

E.C. Do you ever get, in terms of novel writing, stuff that's too outrageous? One wouldn't guess that you reject stuff as being too outrageous.

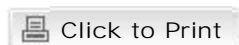
C.M. I don't know, you're somewhat constrained in writing a novel, I think. Like, I'm not a fan of some of the Latin American writers, magical realism. You know, it's hard enough to get people to believe what you're telling them without making it impossible. It has to be vaguely plausible.

E.C. So it's not an impulse that you even have.

C.M. No, not really. Because I think that's misdirected. In films you can do outrageous stuff, because hey, you can't argue with it; there it is. But I don't know. There's lots of stuff that you would like to do, you know. As your future gets shorter, you have to ...

J.C. Prioritize?

C.M. Yeah. Somewhat. A friend of mine, who's slightly older than me, told me, "I don't even buy green bananas anymore." [He laughs.] I'm not quite there yet, but I understood what he was saying.



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